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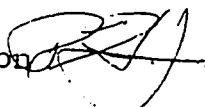
1964/03/01

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MEMORANDUM

March 1, 1964

TO: S/VN - Mr. Sullivan

FROM: S/P - Robert H. Johnson 

SUBJECT: Alternatives for the Imposition of Measured Pressures Against North Vietnam

Attached is an interim report on alternatives for the imposition of measured pressures against North Vietnam. It was prepared by a working group created for the purpose under your committee. The group included representatives of the Department of Defense (ISA), the JCS, CIA, USIA and from FE, G/PM, INR and S/P in the Department of State.

It should be noted that this interim report does not necessarily represent the views of the agencies and offices represented on our group. There was not sufficient time to prepare a formally coordinated report.

The report explores three broad alternative approaches to the problem and raises a number of issues for policy-level consideration. The papers on the three alternatives were prepared by three separate drafting groups. Each drafting group approached its alternative from a slightly different perspective. It is our view that these differences in approach represent an advantage rather than a disadvantage in illuminating the issues involved.

We are aware of the difficult choices that may face us in Vietnam. We have chosen to prepare a report which highlights problems in the belief that the policy-makers will

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desire to be aware of those problems before they make a decision on so important a matter, but not necessarily to suggest that the difficulties involved are of greater magnitude than those that would be involved in the other broad policy alternatives. It is obvious that a decision on the policy alternatives examined in this report will also require consideration of very important questions of the probable domestic U.S. reaction to a basically new departure in U.S. foreign policy. We have not attempted to make an assessment of that reaction.

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DEPARTMENT OF STATE

ALTERNATIVES FOR IMPOSITION OF MEASURED
PRESSURES AGAINST NORTH VIETNAM

March 1, 1964

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When Tabs 3 (Alternative 1), 5 (Alternative 5),
17 (Military Pressures) and pages 48 and 49
of Tab 5 (Alternative 3) are removed, this
paper is classified SECRET.

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KEY ISSUES

(Joint)

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1. The Upper Limits of the U.S. Commitment. Before the U.S. can effectively embark upon a strategy of military pressures on North Vietnam (the DRV), it must first consider the upper limits of the military action it is prepared to take and the extent of the international political costs it is prepared to bear. Political costs which we may encounter would be of two kinds. First would be the cost of persisting in our actions in defiance of international pressures for a cease-fire and a conference. Second would be the political cost of turning off before we had achieved some measure of our objectives.

These political costs must be weighed against those of not undertaking a strategy of military pressures on North Vietnam. Should it be determined that the war in South Vietnam could be lost unless we can in some measure carry the war to the DRV, then we would have to face the political costs of an ultimate break down of the GVN in the South. These costs would have to be weighed against the costs of defying international pressures, and/or the costs of exiting from the action before our objectives had been achieved. Moreover, consideration should also be given to the possibility that, to some extent, adverse political costs of actions against North Vietnam would be offset by

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residual political benefits of having taken a stand. Some such benefits might accrue almost irrespective of the extent of our immediate success in the Vietnamese situation. 7?

The determination of how far the U.S. is prepared to go militarily can be examined from three interrelated points of view: (a) how far we are prepared to carry action within the strategic concept here being examined; (b) how far we are prepared to go if military pressures on North Vietnam fail to produce the desired results but do not result in major Communist escalation; and (c) how far we are prepared to go in responding to possible Communist escalation.

While a very limited amount of bluff may be possible, ultimately our credibility in undertaking lower levels of action within the strategic concept examined here will be adversely affected unless we have decided in advance and are clearly prepared to carry our actions to the higher levels contemplated under the concept.

The most probable reaction to U.S. pressures would be greatly heightened PL and VC activity and pressures for an international conference. We would presumably be unwilling to go to a conference under such conditions. If our pressures do not achieve their desired result, would we continue to apply pressures

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to the DRV until we destroyed most of the significant targets in North Vietnam, and if that did not succeed, to take action on the ground against North Vietnam, in Laos or against Communist China?

While it is not considered likely that the Communist side would respond to U.S. pressures on North Vietnam with radical escalation, such a possibility cannot be ruled out and the U.S. must be prepared for it. Should the war rise to levels significantly higher than those contemplated in our planned strategy, we would have two political questions before us. First would be whether we would continue to respond militarily to escalation from the other side, or whether we would seek to turn off short of our objective. The second question would be whether, if we made the military response and the war escalated well beyond the levels we had contemplated, we would hold to our limited political objectives or whether we would then expand those objectives to a level commensurate with the level of warfare.

It may be that we could leave these political questions open as we embarked on a series of planned actions against North Vietnam. We would need to recognize, however, that escalation by the Communist side could raise the military questions of introduction of substantial U.S. ground troops

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into Southeast Asia, possible war with Communist China, and perhaps the question of nuclear weapons use. We would have to be in a state of readiness to meet the worst military case and we would have to be prepared to convey that fact credibly to the enemy before we started upwards from the lowest levels of violence, if we were to have a reasonable chance of success in what we had ventured. As we started, we would have to be prepared to meet any military contingency, even if we were subsequently to choose to turn off short of having achieved our objectives. The point is that we would have to reserve for ourselves the option of turning off or of counter-escalating.

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2. Our Attitude Toward a Conference or Other Form of International Negotiation. A conference or other negotiations can be viewed from a positive or negative point of view. If our real objective is to affect DRV behavior rather than to negotiate new more satisfactory international arrangements, a conference is unlikely to contribute to achieving our goal. But the most certainly predictable political result of a program of higher-scale US military pressures on the DRV will be intense pressures for an international conference. Our position may be made more difficult if the DRV claims it is not supporting the VC or the PL and ceases its more detectable activities. Would we then continue military pressures? Would we go to a conference? If it in fact ceases all activities temporarily in order to obtain a conference and subsequently resumes its activities would we resume military pressures in the middle of a conference?

*our attitude
limited
pressure*

From a positive point of view, application of pressures upon North Vietnam can be considered a means of acquiring a bargaining counter for subsequent negotiations.

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If we are to achieve favorable results in an international negotiation we must, through our pressures, have already achieved some significant effect upon DRV behavior and must be prepared to continue pressures during negotiations as a means of inducing the DRV to make concessions. One way in which this might be accomplished is to make a satisfactorily policed cease-fire (which will be very difficult to obtain) the first objective of the negotiations, meanwhile continuing military pressures. Alternatively, we would have to seize and hold some DRV territory as a bargaining counter. To do either would require a US willingness to accept continuing international political pressure. If our objective is a conference, what are our negotiating objectives, taking account of the great difficulties involved in achieving arrangements which will themselves help create more favorable conditions on the ground?

*on the conference
about
the source of
the info*

3. The Links Between US Action and DRV Reaction >

A critical factor which remains to be determined is whether a discernable cessation of DRV support, direction, and control

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and control of Viet Cong activities in South Vietnam would in fact result in a favorable environment for a successful counterinsurgency effort, and if so, to what extent.

4. Measurement of Communist Compliance with US Demands. The US must be able to justify, particularly to the rest of the world, the continuation of military pressures ~~when~~ the DRV continues its activities. Similarly, it must be able to justify, particularly to the US public, the cessation of pressure ~~when~~ *if and when* it believes that there has been substantial DRV performance. Yet the measurement of DRV performance in a manner that is internationally and domestically convincing is exceedingly difficult, given the character of DRV activities.

If we define our objectives too specifically, we will have great difficulty producing evidence that will convincingly justify either cessation or continuation of pressures. On the other hand, a more general demand that the DRV stop the war in the South is likely to be widely believed by other nations to be an unrealizable objective because of the

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important indigenous element in the dissidence in South Vietnam.

The DRV might very well exploit this presumption by lowering the level of its support of the war in the South and perhaps temporarily ceasing its more detectable activities for a period until pressures are removed. The US would therefore have to be prepared to resume its pressures.

Indicate
An objective of reduction in the level of DRV activity, which is the practical alternative suggested in the papers below, is still subject to problems of definition and justification in particular circumstances. If it were possible to do so (and the preliminary determination is that it would not) the public use of sensitive intelligence would provide a limited partial answer but would fall far short of adequate and convincing measurement of total DRV performance.

5. The Problem of Justification. The problem of justification is partly a legal, primarily a political problem

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problem. The problem will be less one of establishing the fact of intervention by the DRV in Laos and South Vietnam than one of establishing that our action is reasonably calculated to achieve limited objectives.

Particular forms of action would raise particular legal problems. A general legal question is whether and how we can base our action upon violation of the 1954 and 1962 Geneva Accords. We are not, of course, a signatory to the 1954 Accords on Vietnam. From a political point of view, it appears in some respects more attractive to base ourselves upon the 1962 Laos Accords which we have quite faithfully observed. Procedurally, however, we would be bound by requirements under the agreement for advance consultation with the parties to it. Generally action under the 1962 agreement would also require consent of the Government of Laos, but action against North Vietnam based upon violation of the Laos corridor provision might, perhaps, be justified without such consent. (Action in Laos itself would, of course, require RLG assent.)

The problem

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The problem of politically justifying the US action arises largely from a tendency of other countries to view the problems of Vietnam more in political than in military terms. There will be a strong tendency simply to view the war there as a continuation of a twenty-year-old "civil war" rather than as international aggression.

6. Communication with the Communists. Particular issues appear with respect to the USSR and the DRV. Consideration might be given to seeking to blunt the Soviet reaction in at least two possible ways. The first would be to increase the US appearance of interest in serious negotiations or joint activity on a wide range of issues. A second might be to somehow exploit the Sino-Soviet split and its relationship to the DRV. What prospects to these possibilities offer?

A difference in approach to the question of communication with the DRV is reflected in the three "Alternatives" papers below. On the one hand, it can be argued that direct communication with the DRV (perhaps through a

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covert channel) is necessary to make clear the limited nature of US objectives and to make evident that there is a ready way out of the crisis for the DRV short of major destruction. Such communication of objectives may also be important if we are to avoid having initial US pressures drive the DRV immediately into the arms of the Chinese Communists.

On the other hand direct conversations might lead to efforts to search for the terms of a negotiated settlement before our pressures have had a significant favorable effect upon DRV behavior in Laos and South Vietnam.

7. The South Vietnam and Laotian Base. Our presumption would be that the engagement of new increments of US political and military power in support of the SVN's principal effort would be heartening to the government, armed forces, and people of South Vietnam. Perhaps the physical introduction of US troops into the area would most likely to have positive morale effects. Yet there may be circumstances in which our action might yield

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the reverse effect. Where the present GVN would probably support any of the three alternatives, the third one, involving US destruction of Vietnamese lives and property in the North, might stir some anti-American sentiment in the SVN public and government. If VC activity increased in the South, and this were attributed to our program, there would probably be a negative reaction. It is also possible that fears of retaliation against the South would increase along with sentiment for an end to the war. The French would probably fan such attitudes and the possibilities of a neutralist or VC inspired coup would rise. Without the support of the GVN it would become virtually impossible politically to justify continued US pressures against the North. If the US action stimulated seriously increased DRV/VC military pressure, the US position would be more directly threatened.

Major action by the US to apply pressure on the DRV in Laos, or a DRV response in Laos to attacks upon DRV territory

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territory, could cause Souvanna to resign with the probability that the structure erected upon the 1962 Accords would have to be abandoned. Such a development could also adversely affect the political-legal basis of our action.

8. Timing and Sequence of Action. A gradual increase in pressures from a low (covert) level will permit continuing assessment of the possibility of escalation and greater opportunity for turning off. At the same time, a gradual increase will provide maximum opportunity for build-up of Communist reactions and international pressures. (Whatever the balance of advantage, the decision concerning timing may be forced upon us by events in SVN.)

Large-scale non-attributable action might also corrupt the legal and moral basis for subsequent overt operations. It is therefore most important to decide how far we will go, now and in the future, before we undertake the more serious forms of unattributable action.

If we do

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If we do plan to undertake overt US military action of the highest level within the terms of the present concept, we might be well advised not to undertake such higher forms of unattributable action.

9. Control Arrangements. The execution of such a strategy will require precisely integrated coordination of political, military and other activities on a phased basis so that they will be mutually re-enforcing and they will have maximum opportunity to produce the desired effects upon Communist political decisions. Because of the primarily political objective and the dangers involved in decisions based upon immediate local considerations, some matters that would ordinarily be considered matters of military or political operational technique will become major questions of high policy. Yet detailed control from Washington could introduce inflexibility and serious time-lags. How should the government be organized so as (a) to provide the desired mixture of flexibility and control and (b) to insure that

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important decisions are made at top levels without totally
by-passing expert advice and ignoring important local
considerations?

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